

Public attitudes to new smokefree outdoor places policies in New Zealand: an analysis of 217 online comments

Background—There is very limited evidence in the qualitative literature about the reasons the public think smoking should or should not be allowed in outdoor areas. One study in Toronto, Canada found some smokers were more comfortable smoking away from non-smokers. Non-smokers reported discomfort, nuisance, health concerns and repugnance about cigarette butt litter.¹

In some media websites, readers can leave online comments alongside electronic news articles, and this has increased the ability of the public to comment on news articles.² There appear to be few published analyses of online *comments* provoked by tobacco-related news items. These have found conflicting views from smokers and non-smokers, as well as discourses around quitting, rights and evidence.³

Because of the restricted qualitative evidence about attitudes to them, we aimed to identify what themes could be found in online discussions provoked by news articles on smokefree outdoor public areas in New Zealand, and to explore the potential utility of this data source for public health research more generally.

Methods—Using the Factiva media database we searched for online public responses to New Zealand newspaper stories, from 1 June 2012 to 31 January 2013, that described possible smokefree outdoor policies. Using the search words ‘smoking’, ‘outdoor’ and ‘policy’ we found 10 such articles with accompanying online discussions, with a total of 375 online comments. Comments were excluded from analysis if they: (a) only concerned a total ban on tobacco smoking in New Zealand (not just outdoors), (b) focused only on critiquing/heckling other commenters or (c) only concerned another issue, for example air pollution from traffic.

The remaining relevant comments were coded and themes and sub-themes identified. For the relevant comments, the author’s support or opposition to the proposed smokefree policies, or whether they appeared to be neutral or unclear on their position, was determined.

Results—All 375 comments identified were relatively concise (mean: 79 words, range: 1–247 words). There were 217 relevant comments (58% of the total 375 comments). Of the authors who posted relevant comments, 41% appeared to support outdoor smokefree area policies, 48% opposed and 11% were either unclear in their sentiments or appeared neutral.

Four major theme groups emerged, with many associated themes and sub-themes:

- The first theme group consisted of concerns about smoking in public, including health issues, normalisation of smoking, the risk of cues for ex-smokers to smoke, pollution from tobacco smoke and repugnance towards smoking.
- The second major theme group supported or doubted the scientific evidence that smoking and secondhand smoke (SHS) harms human health. Myths were

commonly articulated; in particular that exposure to SHS is harmless and easily avoidable.

- The third theme group highlighted perceived rights in society and associated justice or equity issues. Many felt ‘people have the right to smoke in public if they choose’. Conversely many others felt ‘everyone has the right to clean air’.
- The fourth theme group concerned the appropriateness of proposed smokefree policies. Opinions ranged from viewing these measures as overly restrictive, to just right, and to not restrictive enough. The practicality of implementing the policies was a strong theme, and some commenters made suggestions on how to go about implementation. Smokefree policies in other parts of the country and overseas were frequently referred to.

Beyond the material in themes 2 and 3, there was considerable antagonism shown by commentators. Around half the commenters appeared to have negative attitudes towards smokers.

Discussion—The study of online comments appears to be a useful way to identify major themes relating to public knowledge and attitudes, in this case on smokefree outdoor area policies. Ideally, such comments would be used in combination with other data sources such as content analysis of media, and in-depth interviews or focus groups with key informants and the public. Quantitative studies (e.g., surveys) should also be considered in order to comprehensively understand the key drivers and barriers to new outdoor smokefree policies. However, as a qualitative data source, online comments have multiple advantages, including easy access, large volumes, and relative lack of inhibitions compared to other sources of opinions.

Because of the proportion of negative online comments, the politics around smokefree outdoor policies may be influenced away from the direction of majority opinion by the visibility and prominence of opposing views. The themes found could allow advocates and policymakers to plan for or take advantage of the responses. They have emerged widely in debates about smokefree place policies.⁴⁻⁶

Advocates and policymakers in New Zealand need to be aware of the very strong ‘rights’ discourse around smokefree outdoor places policies.^{7,8}

A detailed report on this study is freely available online at <http://www.otago.ac.nz/wellington/otago067456.pdf>

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Acknowledgements: Funding was received from the New Zealand Asthma Foundation (but that organisation played no role in the content of this study or the decision to publish).

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